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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the television production components and to suggest the research hypotheses and designs that will yield a more systematic exploration of the importance of the use of facial closeups in television interviews. The first part of the paper discusses three potential factors that may influence a viewer's judgment of a screen subject's message: (1) the dissonance between facial and verbal sources and the apparently greater "trustworthiness" of the message from the face, (2) the ability of the closeup shot to strongly concentrate attention on a given face, and (3) the visual context in which the closeup appears. The second part of the paper discusses several possible scenarios concerning the relative influence of these three factors and offers both the hypotheses these scenarios suggest and an experimental design for testing the hypotheses. The conclusion of the paper examines the implications such research might have, particularly that the facial closeup shot is a powerful and potentially dangerous tool for eliciting specific viewer responses to television interviews. (RL)

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The Television Closeup Shot

And

Dissonant Verbal and Visual Sources

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The facial closeup shot at the moment of a leading question is a technique used with some frequency by the producers of the CBS program "60 Minutes." The usual target is an apparently corrupt bureaucrat or labor leader whose facial expression as revealed by close camera viewpoint seems inevitably to contradict what is being expressed verbally.

This style of television interrogation raises several important questions about the information the viewer receives from the screen. What produces the sense of contradiction between facial expression and words? Is there a tendency to believe the message from the face in such situations, and if so, does the closeup shot play a part in this facial dominance? What role does context play in defining the meaning of facial expression?

Answering these questions would seem to be valuable not only because the television techniques mentioned above are so often used, but because we as viewers regularly form judgments about public figures based on such apparent dissonance between verbal and visual signals. Consider as an example the puzzling incongruity of Jimmy Carter's smile, or better, the facial behavior of Richard Nixon during the Frost interviews. As the former President asserts his innocence in connection with burglaries committed by White House operatives, the camera comes in tightly on his face. The heavy brows settle down over the eyes, and for a moment Nixon becomes the popular caricature of himself, the beady-eyed guilty party of Watergate. Despite his words, the camera clearly shows that he is "lying."

The purpose of this paper will be to analyze the three main components of such television presentations: The conflicting visual-verbal message; close camera viewpoint; and visual context. The aim of this discussion will be to produce testable hypotheses that will yield a more systematic exploration of these components. Finally, the paper will suggest an experiment to test the hypotheses.

The main focus of the paper will be on the response of the viewer to the person seen on the screen. It will thus be concerned with viewer judgments such as like and dislike or feelings about the veracity of the message being sent. The paper will not take into account such other factors as motivations for watching a given presentation or possible actions as a result.

Second, the paper will take the point of view that judgments made by the viewer about people on the screen will be largely suppositional. However, this will not influence the power or impact of such judgments or their sense of reality. In other words, the viewer will probably not be able to varify the feeling gained by viewing facial expression that a politician is not telling the truth. Yet one must assume that this feeling constitutes to an important extent the message received.

Contradictory facial and verbal sources

According to Ekman and Friesen, the face is an enormously complex signal system capable of more than a thousand "appearances" that can be read by others either as indicators of inner feelings or as overt symbolic messages.[1]

No single object is better known than the human face and no object is evaluated with such perceptual skill, writes Tomkins.[2] The central reason for this fact is that the face is an object with

which everyone has a great deal of experience throughout life.

These observations are cited here to suggest the potency of the face as a visual information channel. The observer who sees the face of another person is likely to make suppositions about how that person feels inside, what he might be thinking, and more generally, how he is coping with a particular situation.[3]

Such judgments are based on distinct facial expressions of emotion or subtle indicators that can be read by the careful observer. For example, Ekman and Friesen describe the "clues to deception" that appear on the face as a person attempts to conceal or mask what is actually being felt: a certain awkwardness of expression, or a facial gesture that seems inappropriate or poorly timed. A person may also betray his real feelings through the brief "leakage" of a facial expression that is true to the emotions inside. The brevity of such expressions suggests the sender's effort to bring his face under control.[4]

Compare this visual-facial channel, on the other hand, with the verbal channel, which according to Burns and Beier provides primarily "lexical" information--words and ideas. Unlike facial expression, which seems to develop spontaneously from the earliest age, the verbal channel is the product of a relatively structured learning experience in which grammar and vocabulary are acquired.[5]

A main characteristic of verbal language important to consider here is that it is readily susceptible to control. It can be rehearsed aloud or in the mind, or written down. A speaker can thus more easily falsify his words than his facial expressions, and he can more easily avoid unintended meanings.

The face can also be controlled to some extent, Ekman and Friesen point out, but most people are far less practiced at it. In addition, facial expressions are likely to be fast and spontaneous: "The facial expressions that are triggered during the experience of an emotion are involuntary (although they may be interfered with), and the words are not."[6]

It is this apparent difference in the fundamental nature of the two message sources that makes facial expression more "trustworthy," as Ekman and Friesen put it. If there is a conflict between facial and verbal messages people are more likely to believe the face because they sense that the face is always somewhat beyond conscious control. In other words, if one person detects a suggestion of guilt on the face of another, this expression may well produce doubt about contradictory verbal statements simply because the observer is likely to place greater credence in the more spontaneous source of information.

There is some experimental evidence to support this proposition. Goodenough and Tinker in a study of written and facial messages found that in the case of some facial expressions of emotion the visual channel would determine an observer's judgment of meaning despite conflicting verbal cues.[7] Burns and Beier found that visual cues in the form of video taped posed facial expressions dominate judges' interpretations of emotional meanings when compared with verbal cues.[8] Mehrabian and Ferris determined that both facial expressions and words would convey a distinct emotional meaning in a two-channel communication, but that the facial component had the stronger impact on observer judgments.[9]

Though these conclusions must be tempered somewhat by the findings of Shapiro[10] that some viewers will inherently prefer one channel over another, it seems fairly clear that the visual message in the form of facial expression will tend to dominate viewer judgments of emotional meaning when there is conflict with the verbal channel. The implication of this idea in the context of this paper is that if the visual channel is emphasized through the closeup shot it may become even more "trustworthy." The paper will return to this subject in discussing hypotheses to be tested.

Close camera viewpoint

In discussing the power of the closeup shot to focus attention and reveal facial expressions of emotion, one must deal with a considerable amount of television lore. Green, for example, has suggested that the closeup provides an extraordinary degree of intimacy because the camera becomes a psychological "X-ray machine."[11] Tarroni has suggested that the closeup when aimed at the face produces a sense of "psychological penetration."[12]

No doubt there is a good deal of intuitive justification for such observations. It seems fairly obvious that when the camera frames in exclusively on the face there is little else on the screen to attract attention. The clear message seems to be, watch this face and pay attention to the expressions it displays.

However, there are two areas of research that may be discussed briefly that will help elucidate the perceptual and emotional power of the closeup technique. One concerns the figure-ground relationship within the screen and the other is the nature of eye fixations as a sign of interest and attention.

The Gestalt psychologists have suggested that figure and ground are involved in a continuing dynamic relationship. Objects that for a moment are lost in the indistinguished background may come to be the focus of attention and thus be considered as figure. The figure by definition has the characteristics of activity and potency, while the background is relatively quiescent.

However, this system, which operates in the normal environment, may be considerably altered as one attends to the television screen. According to Hochberg, the information supplied by peripheral vision is radically reduced because of the small size of the pictorial area. Thus the dynamic, free-flowing relationship between figure and ground may be curtailed. In addition, the choice of the most prominent element within the picture field is made by the producer or director of a given presentation. To the extent that the viewer remains fixed to the screen, those objects that become figure and those that remain part of the ground will be largely the choice of someone else.[13]

The impact of these circumstances with relation to the closeup shot is that ground (as represented by the already pictorially limited physical environment of the person on the screen) is involuntarily eliminated from view. This action would seem to have the effect of extreme concentration of attention.

Research into the ways people look at still and moving pictures shows a clear correlation between eye fixation and attention. Objects that attract the most attention will receive the greatest number and length of eye fixations.[14] Studies of this phenomenon using cameras to "map" eye movements and fixations during viewing of

pictorial material have found that if human figures are present, they inevitably receive the most attention, with the highest number of fixations falling on the face, particularly the eyes and mouth.[15]

This conclusion was supported to some extent by studies done by Wolf and Guba of eye movements and fixations during television watching. Their studies of educational films showed that when a narrator was shown on camera his face would attract repeated attention unless he directed the viewer by gesture to some other object of interest.[16]

The importance of such findings for this discussion is to suggest that the face is inherently interesting and attractive. And though this idea is speculative, one may thus conclude that the closeup shot functions as a way of fulfilling a desire that already exists on the part of the viewer--to scrutinize a face. In this sense, the closeup shot may not only function to stimulate viewer attention, but to transfix it.

Visual context

The question of context as it applies to the interpretation of a facial closeup shot and accompanying words is an enormous one. Consider the example of the Nixon interview mentioned at the beginning of this paper. A multitude of circumstances, not the least of them the Watergate scandal, might easily influence the viewer's judgment of Nixon's verbal or facial meaning at a given moment. In this respect, it seems highly unlikely that many knowledgeable viewers would absolve Nixon of Watergate complicity simply on the strength of verbal denials made during a television interview. Furthermore, this "prejudice" would unquestionably affect judgment of his facial expression at the moment of such statements.

It is well beyond the scope of this paper to deal with such extensive questions of context. However, there is one important contextual question that is relevant here that could be subject to experimental manipulation, and which might profoundly influence viewer judgments of meaning. It is the sequential visual context in which a given facial closeup shot is used.

There is considerable experimental evidence that shows that visual context--that is, the sequence and order of shots--will determine viewer judgments of a given facial closeup. Most of this research is based on the idea from Gestalt psychology that the meaning of a part will be determined by the whole.

One notable finding from such studies has been that a neutral facial expression will develop a specific meaning in the mind of the observer when juxtaposed with other images that supply a visual context.

Kuiper, for example, showed three short films of four shots each to groups of observers.[17] All the films were identical except for the third shot, which was varied to provide an emotional context. Thus, film A opens with a shot of a male actor entering the frame against a neutral backdrop. In the next shot he is shown looking screen right. The third shot shows an attractive young woman in a bathing suit; she turns and smiles directly into the camera. The fourth shot shows the same man in a head-and-shoulders closeup. His facial expression is neutral.

In the two other versions of the film the bathing suit shot is replaced by a child running toward the camera and a man stepping into the street and being struck by a car. Kuiper notes that the

fourth shot in all the films was framed in such a way as to make it appear that the actor was looking at the preceding action (shot 3).

Each film was shown to a different group of subjects who rated the man's expression in shot four according to a set of descriptive adjectives. General results showed that for the bathing suit film, the emotions of passion and lust received the highest mean scores, indicating that most viewers thought these emotions were descriptive of the actor's facial expression. For the child film, indifference and love were thought most descriptive. Indifference and fear were the emotions receiving the highest ratings for the accident film.

To understand the importance of such findings for the use of facial closeups in interviews such as those mentioned at the beginning of this paper, it is necessary to look at some of the visual possibilities available in the typical television interview format. According to Millerson, the interviewer and interviewee are usually positioned facing slightly away from each other, much as if they were conversing across the corner of a table. The most important consideration is that this structure allows a variety of camera shots in an otherwise visually static presentation. The director may choose from a "cover shot" in which both participants are seen facing each other from opposite sides of the screen, over-the-shoulder shots showing one participant head-on from behind the other, and a multitude of closeups, some directly head-on and others from a profile angle.

The Nixon-Frost interviews offer an excellent example of the

impact of this type of presentation. In the first segment, in which Watergate and Vietnam were discussed, the viewer encounters a tense and defensive Nixon. These traits are made manifest in the medium cover shot in which the former President seems to be withdrawing from Frost, pushing back into his chair and hunching his neck down into his body. In the over-the-shoulder shot from Frost's point of view, this impression becomes even more pronounced as we see that Nixon's legs are tightly crossed and his hands are gripping the arms of the chair.

It is this visual context that precedes the closeup shot in which Nixon responds to questions about his complicity in Watergate related burglaries. As noted earlier, the impression received (at least by this viewer) was one of guilt.

The second interview, however, seemed to create an entirely different context. The subject was foreign policy, specifically China and the Middle East, two areas where Nixon had had triumphs. Here the camera widened out on several occasions to show Nixon gesturing ebulliently with his hands and arms. In the over-the-shoulder shot from Frost's point of view, he was seen leaning forward in his chair, seemingly enthusiastic rather than defensive. Closeups showed a man who seemed confident of his subject and who at times grinned with a dry sense of humor.

Analyzing such a presentation, it first seems clear that there would be few opportunities for the simple kind of juxtapositional relationships used in the Kuiper study. Rather, the important concern is the moment at which the closeup is used in the context established by wider shots and the verbal give and take

of the interview. Isenhour has suggested in this respect that such techniques (e.g. zooming in for a closeup) represent a type of juxtapositional "assertion."[18] This assertion is not only defined by the moment the particular image appears on the screen in relation to other shots, but also has to do with the expectations established prior to showing the image. Thus, when the face finally appears in isolation on the screen, meaning of its expression may already be determined by such factors as the nature of the question that was asked, and the perceived attitude of the questioner and respondent.

Hypothesis development

The foregoing discussion suggests that there are three potential factors that may influence the viewer's judgment of a screen subject's message: The dissonance between facial and verbal sources and the apparently greater "trustworthyness" of the message from the face; the ability of the closeup shot to strongly concentrate attention on a given face; and the visual context in which the closeup appears.

The main question at this point is how do these factors interact to make the viewer believe, for example, that someone is lying.

In considering this question, it should first be understood that viewers apparently do not consciously weigh facial-visual information sources against verbal sources and then come to a "reasoned out" conclusion. As Goffman has pointed out, people presenting themselves to others (as in the case of an interview) are engaged in performances. Observers of these performances have expectations about the congruity or harmoniousness of the various elements that transmit information. Generally speaking, if the

various sources are congruent then the impression fostered will coincide with that which is intended by the performer. However, flaws will convey a sense of "difference" between the intentional and the unintentional. This difference creates an impression of an underlying reality that the performer wishes to conceal.[19]

"Impression" is the key word here because unless the observer has information from other sources his judgment will be based on sensations or feelings gained as he watches and listens to what transpires before him. According to Goffman, such judgmental responses would necessarily be intuitive, but that would not make them less real or important to the observer. In addition, it should be pointed out that these kinds of judgments need not be on the rather specific level under discussion up to now--such as, "he's lying." They may relate to general feelings about a subject's competency, personal appeal, or character, among other traits.

There are several possible "scenarios" one can propose concerning the relative influence of the three factors developed in this paper. If, for example, facial expression is more trustworthy than verbal expression, use of the facial closeup shot may tend to emphasize this sense of veracity. In other words, by making the face the sole object of visual attention on the screen, the closeup might well amplify the facial message to the detriment of the verbal.

In this respect, it is also possible to envision moments when the closeup makes the face of such striking importance that normally undetectable expressions (such as Ekman and Friesen's "leakage") are made visible. Such visibility might conceivably render otherwise harmonious performances as dissonant.

One can raise similar questions about the impact of visual context. For example, in the first Nixon-Frost interview, the image sequence and other contextual information may well have led the viewer to the wrong conclusion concerning Nixon's truthfulness. Perhaps his facial expression was really neutral rather than "guilty." Would it have been preceived as neutral if it had been seen in another context?

Such propositions suggest not only the revelatory power of the closeup shot as it relates to dissonant verbal and visual sources, but also the potential susceptibility of the viewer to misjudgment of meaning. It would thus seem important to identify in a more systematic way the relationship between given closeup-expression interactions and viewer response.

Two experimental questions are suggested in this regard: If there is clear dissonance between the verbal and visual sources, to what degree can perception of that dissonance (as measured by changed viewer judgments) be determined by camera viewpoint? And will the transition to the face at a given contextual moment define the meaning of a neutral facial expression, thus making it appear dissonant with the verbal?

As suggested by the discussion of Goffman's ideas, viewer impressions must be the criteria for measurement as such questions are probed experimentally. Which impressions are likely to change, given variables like camera viewpoint and dissonant facial-verbal sources?

In the most general sense, a judgment of "acceptance" would function as a logical criterion because it not only implies a feeling

about the person on an emotional level, but perhaps also a more reasoned judgment about whether the message presented is to be believed. Within acceptance might come such other criteria as feelings about veracity or trustworthyness, judgments of like and dislike, and outright negative or positive feelings. Acceptance may also relate to feelings of empathy or identification, for it seems likely that the viewer will more readily empathize with someone who demonstrates an ability to perform without offering conflicting informational and emotional cues.* (In fact, this was my experience in watching the Nixon-Frost interviews. In the second interview when Nixon was relaxed and spontaneous, I found it much easier to identify with him as another human being.)

Using acceptance as a criterion, let us propose the following experimental hypotheses: 1. If there is clear dissonance between verbal and facial sources, viewer acceptance of the screen subject will decrease with the use of the facial closeup shot and increase with the use of medium or longer shots. 2. The viewer will perceive facial-verbal dissonance (again gauged by acceptance) when a neutral face is shown in closeup while visual context and verbal messages suggest contradictory meanings.

Proposed experiment

An experiment to test these hypotheses can be based on the formal interview format proposed by Millerson. Interviews would be contrived

* The reader may note a similarity between "acceptance" and the notion of source credibility which has been exploited in a number of studies of television visualization and performance. By proposing acceptance the writer hopes to suggest a concept that will provide greater access to the viewer's emotional reaction to and involvement with the person on the screen. Experimental use of this concept will require considerable additional study to flesh out meaningful factorial dimensions.

in which actors played the parts of interviewer and subject. The interviewer would take an appropriately inquisitory stance while the respondent would be put in the position of self justification. A denial of guilt as in the Nixon-Frost interview, however, would not be necessary.

The first hypothesis could be tested by having the respondent pose facial expressions that conflicted in meaning with a verbal response. Two cameras placed side by side would record this action. Both cameras might begin on an over-the-shoulder shot from the point of view of the interviewer. However, as the response was about to be delivered one camera would zoom in for a closeup shot of the interview subject.

The same procedure would be repeated with the respondent sending consistant or "non-dissonant" facial-verbal messages.

Such a procedure would provide four video tapes which could then be shown to four groups of judges. As a possible further reference to the relative power of the visual versus verbal sources, an audio tape of the interview could be played to a fifth group.

The judges would be asked to rate their feelings about the performance of the interview subject based on the notion of acceptance. Semantic differential or Likert-type scales would be used with such ranges of feeling as trustworthyness-untrustworthyness, like-dislike, negative-positive, and identification-non-identification. If the first hypothesis gained support, one would expect the group seeing a closeup of dissonant verbal-visual sources to report significantly higher scores on the negative ends of these scales.

Success of such an experiment would rest heavily on the ability of an actor to subtly and realistically pose dissonant and non-dissonant verbal and visual cues. Exaggerated or artificial looking facial expressions could easily distort results. It should also be noted that experimental judges may well be aware of vocal clues to feeling--that is, the actor's tone of voice. In performing the experiment, vocalization should be as natural as possible. The experiment, however, will not be able to take such clues into account as a measurable variable.

The second hypothesis will be even more difficult to test because of the need to establish varying presentational contexts. One possible approach would employ a technique used by "60 Minutes." Information is delivered by one of the program's correspondents that implicates the interview subject in wrongdoing. Immediately afterward there is a cut to a closeup shot of the subject's face while the correspondent delivers a pointed question. The subject then responds.

This kind of situation could be contrived for the experiment by devising a short investigative-type report in which an actor plays the role of the implicated party. Contextual information would be provided by the report, and also by the nature of the cut to the closeup as the leading question is asked. The actor's facial expression would be held strictly neutral, though his words would contradict the guilt implied by the preceding visual and spoken cues.

To vary the experiment for the purposes of comparison, the final closeup shot could be replaced in a second tape by a "cover shot" showing the interviewer and respondent. This more loosely framed

shot during the respondent's answer should serve to considerably alter the impact of the incriminating report and interrogation.

The two tapes would be shown to different groups of judges who would respond on the same measurement scales used in the test of the first hypothesis. Again one would expect higher scores on the negative ends of these scales for the closeup version, suggesting a higher level of perceived verbal-visual dissonance.

Conclusions

What might such an experiment show? Significant support for the two hypotheses posed here would offer strong evidence that the facial closeup shot is not only a powerful tool but a potentially dangerous one. By emphasizing facial expressions that might be contradictory to verbal expressions, the closeup may provide genuine clues to deception. However, there is no guarantee that viewer impressions gained in this way will accurately reflect the "reality" of a given situation. This latter point becomes especially pertinent when considering hypothesis two. If in fact context-defined closeups can promote a sense of verbal-visual dissonance despite neutral facial expressions, then it seems clear that there is considerable room for distortion. An interview subject could easily be victimized by a contrived context that placed his words and face in apparent conflict.

In the widest sense, such an experiment might show the need for greater viewer sophistication with regard to television techniques like the closeup shot. But it may also show the need for greater awareness of how we may be misled by the apparent predilection to trust information from the face over other sources.

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